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Capt. Phillips and the Fight against Cholera

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Under the command of pioneering scientist Capt. Robert Phillips, NAMRU-2 honed an international reputation for its fight against parasitic diseases, most notably cholera.

Cholera is a killing disease. It strikes quickly, and if you don't get treatment quickly you die...Cholera is an intestinal disease. It quickly attacks the body's organisms and causes acute uncontrollable diarrhea and great loss of body fluids...Cholera is also a highly contagious.

~Voice of America Radio Documentary on Cholera (I)



When Saigon was hit by a massive cholera

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outbreak in early January 1964, it was little surprise that South Vietnamese health officials called upon NAMRU-2 for assistance.

From Guam to Manila, and Jakarta to Cambodia, Naval Medical Research Unit No. 2 (NAMRU-2) has arguably faced the ever-changing winds of geo-politics more than any other military medical laboratory. Established at the end of the Second World War to investigate tropical diseases affecting U.S. service personnel in the Pacific theater, it could be said that NAMRU-2 truly came into its own when it was reactivated in Taipei, Taiwan in September 1955.

Under the command of pioneering scientist Capt. Robert Phillips, NAMRU-2 honed an international reputation for its fight against parasitic diseases, most notably cholera. (3)

During cholera epidemics in India, Pakistan, Thailand and the Philippines, NAMRU-2 scientists saved untold lives by treating victims with a saline-based rehydration therapy developed by Phillips. (4) When Saigon was hit by a massive cholera outbreak in early January 1964, it was little surprise that South Vietnamese health officials called upon NAMRU-2 for assistance.



On Jan. 19, 1964, Phillips and his six-person team became the first foreign medical unit to arrive in Saigon during the epidemic.

First identified at Saigon's Pasteur Institute on Jan. 7, 1964, the South Vietnamese cholera epidemic was one of the deadliest to hit Asia. Reported cholera cases in Saigon alone numbered more than 4,000 and some medical authorities suspected that numbers of unreported cases in and around the city may have been three-fold and possibly up to one-third of Saigon's one-million people. (5)

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On Jan. 19, 1964, Phillips and his six-person team became the first foreign medical unit to arrive in Saigon during the epidemic. (6) They established a base of operations at the Cho Quan Infectious Disease Hospital where they were allotted 128-hospital beds, and a medical laboratory. Immediately, Phillips established a "demonstration team" to familiarize Vietnamese medical personnel with his effective cholera treatments.

Over the course of the next month (7), NAMRU-2 and Vietnamese medical personnel worked around the clock treating more than 2,000 cases and a mortality rate less than one percent. (8)

Phillips would later say, "If it hadn't been for our operation perhaps eighty...patients in our Saigon wards would have died of cholera. Maybe thousands more Vietnamese would have died of cholera in other parts of this town." (9)

Endnotes:

(1) Angelo, Michael. Voice of America Documentary Transcript, 18 Feb 1964. Cholera/5720. Bureau of Medicine and Surgery Record Group (52). National Archives II, College Park, Md.

(2) Briefly redesignated as the U.S. Naval Institute of Tropical Medicine (NITM) in 1946 NAMRU-2 was deactivated in 1947. It was located in Taipei, Taiwan from 1955 to 1979

(3) Throughout his career, Capt. Robert Phillips, MC, USN (1906-1976) earned a reputation for his research and treatment of tropical diseases, including the development of a vaccine against trachoma. His conception of a simpler cholera treatment was realized in the late 1960s with the development of glucose-based oral rehydration therapy, a monumental breakthrough to which many other investigators made vital contributions. Today, these simple advances have been integrated into everyday medical practice across the globe, saving millions of lives annually. Phillips served as Commanding Officer of NAMRU-2 from 1955 to 1965.

(4) Sometimes referred to as the "Cholera Cocktail," this method consisted of feeding patients intravenously with a bicarbonate and saline solution.

(5) According to one report, there were over 4,000 cases in Saigon and provinces yielding

434 deaths by Feb. 6, 1964. "Progress Report No. 2." Cholera/6310. Bureau of Medicine and Surgery Record Group (52). National Archives II, College Park, Md.

(6) NAMRU-2's cholera team consisted of CAPT Phillips, Lieut. M.L. Fitts, Ens. J.E. Roselock, HMC J.W. Pampsch, HMC F. Tantalo and HM1 P.M. Versage. The epidemic was so severe that Phillips brought over 10 additional medical officers, scientists and preventive medicine technicians from NAMRU-2's Manila detachment. They were also assisted in Saigon by medical personnel with the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG).

(7) NAMRU-2 Team would depart Saigon on Feb. 26, 1964.

(8) Three patients of NAMRU-2's patients would die from complications (tuberculosis, kidney disease) after recovering from acute phase of cholera.

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